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ABSTRACT

The concept of genre should not be limited to literary genres, but should be expanded to include all types of texts, including those traditionally considered to be nonliterary. Essentially, many things about writing work the way they do because of genre, and a better understanding of genre can give us a better understanding of writing, reading and texts. Genre offers a great deal since it embodies a rhetorical situation and a discourse community. The form that a text takes represents writers' choices in response to a given situation. Genres allow teachers to see various types of values and audiences, and to generalize about communities and their situations. A better understanding of genre could have a powerful impact on an understanding of the processes of writing and of certain long-standing problems of composition theory. For example, study of the process of revision may be greatly clarified by bringing in issues of genre. Students might write better if they were given a better understanding of genre, allowing them to aim at a generic "ideal" text when revising. Writing instructors would do well to give more pedagogical and theoretical attention to genre than they currently do, starting with the plain fact that it is a powerful concept essential to any understanding of writing. (HB)

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RECONSIDERING GENRE IN COMPOSITION

When I first began studying genre, I expected to meet some resistance to my ideas from those in literary studies. I was, after all, examining genre as it applied to all kinds of writing, from lab reports to the freshman theme, not just literary types of writing. As it turned out, of course, those in literary studies did not object because they did not see my work--they didn't care enough to object. What surprised me, though, was that I met some resistance from within composition and rhetoric studies. When I sent my first article on genre to a major journal in composition, it came back to me with a rejection and a few remarks; but the main remark, repeated several times in red ink on the first page of my article, was "This is not what genre is!" Since the article was entitled "Reconceptualizing Genre," I found the comment a bit distressing. (Today perhaps I would just chide the editor's foundationalism.) "Genre," to me, refers to all types of texts, nonliterary types as well as literary types. I see no reason to limit "genre" to literary genres, since other texts also group into types, with common characteristics, conventions, purposes, history, and more. But I am most interested in the nonliterary genres, so feel free to consider my discussion today to be about nonliterary genres and reserve judgment about whether my remarks apply to

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literary genres.

I could avoid the resistance to a broader application of the term "genre," perhaps, by shifting my label to "text type" rather than "genre." But that shift would encourage the other main reaction genre receives in composition studies: neglect. Various theorists, developing elaborate conceptions of how writers write or how readers read or how texts work, omit consideration of genre completely until they, typically, come to one statement in the middle, a statement that says something like "Of course, if writers/readers/texts are working from a set plan/ traditional form/established genre, all of this may work very differently." My point today is that many things about writing work the way they do because of a set plan/traditional form/established genre, because of genre, and that at the very least a better understanding of genre can give us a better understanding of how writers write/readers read/ and texts work.

The reason that genre can offer so much is that genre embodies a rhetorical situation and a discourse community. (My theoretical assumptions should be clear now--I believe but will not argue here today that writing operates from a rhetorical situation which is socially constructed by a discourse community. And, because our time today is so brief, I will only outline my theoretical understanding of genre and will spend more time on how genre can improve our understanding of writing.) Genre reflects the rhetorical situation to which it responds. As Lloyd Bitzer pointed out over twenty years ago, in 1968:

> Due to either the nature of things or convention, or both, some situations recur. The courtroom is the focus for several kinds of situations generating the speech of accusation, the speech of defense, the charge to the jury. From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established. This is true also of the situation which invites the inaugural address of a President. The situation recurs and, because we experience situations and the rhetorical responses to them, a form of discourse is not only established but comes to have a power of its own--the tradition itself tends to function as a constraint upon any new response in the form. (p. 392)

Every genre, then, represents a rhetorical situation with significant recurring features: a recurring type of audience role, a recurring exigency, a recurring primary purpose. The "form" that a text takes, therefore, represents writers' choices in response to that situation: choices about tone, type of development, and persona, for example, in addition to choices about organization, layout, and use of the passive. In other words, the nature of the text largely results from the nature of the genre, and the nature of the genre largely results from the nature of the rhetorical situation.

And since the nature of the rhetorical situation results from

the nature of the discourse community--since the rhetorical situation itself is constructed by the discourse community that generates it--the genre also clearly reflects the discourse community, its epistemology, values, and assumptions as well as its common forms. For example, when a tax accountant writes a research memorandum with a body composed largely of quotations from the tax codes, that generic fact speaks volumes about what tax accountants accept as evidence or development. When every article in a composition journal ends with a discussion of the application of this article to teaching, that generic fact says loads about the value of research in that area of composition study.

If we study genres from this perspective, then, we can study their communities and situations. In fact, one way to identify the full complexity of the rhetorical situation and discourse community is to examine traits of its genres. How do we know what a community values? By examining what it values in texts. How do we know how an audience is perceived? By examining the response to the audience in texts. Contexts are always textualized. Since genres are types of texts, they allow us to see types of audiences or values; they allow us to generalize about the community and its situations.

To our understanding of discourse community and of rhetorical situation, then, genre can contribute a great deal of insight. In some ways these theoretical areas already neglect genre less than others: Bitzer's classic article on rhetorical situation, again, does spend some time acknowledging that rhetorical situations recur

and that genres are recurring responses to those situations; and many studies of specific discourse communities pay careful attention to the types of texts those communities produce (Bazerman's studies of the experimental article in science, for example, or Myers' studies of articles in biology). What can attention to genre offer to other areas of composition study?

Although genre is usually viewed as a product of writing, as embodied in particular texts, my view of genre could have a powerful impact on our understanding of the processes of writing. I believe that a better understanding of genre could help us better understand some of the long-standing and often unspoken problems for composition theory--problems like where do writers' goals come from? and how do writers know what to change when they're revising? and how do our principles of writing transfer to improve writing by students? Understanding genre better could also lead us to what James Reither has called a "macro-theory" of writing processes, to encompass the "activities, processes, and kinds of knowing that come into play long before the impulse to write is even possible" (p. 143). Understanding genre can help us understand some of the remaining mysteries of composition theory.

Consider some of the mysteries of processes of writing. The early, classic article by Linda Flower and John Hayes on "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," for example, spent much of its space exploring writers' goals and how they are generated and regenerated. In one paragraph in that article, Flower and Hayes acknowledge the importance of a kind of goal that I would argue

could be seen as coming from writers' set notions about a genre. Flower and Hayes write:

> . . . but we should not forget that many writing goals are well-learned, standard ones stored in memory. For example, we would expect many writers to draw automatically on those goals associated with writing in general, such as, "interest the reader," or "start with an introduction," or on goals associated with a given genre, such as making a jingle rhyme. These goals will often be so basic that they won't even be consciously considered or expressed. And the more experienced the writer the greater this repertory of semi-automatic plans and goals will be. (p. 381)

Notice the devaluing of genre by equating "a given genre" with "making a jingle rhyme." These well-established goals and plans will also come from such genres as tax accountants' research memoranda, the experimental article in science, a letter of complaint, articles for CCC, even the dreaded five-paragraph theme. To understand how many writers write, therefore, is in part (I would argue in large part) to understand how writers use established generic goals and plans. Perhaps most experienced writers don't generate goals as Flower and Hayes describe the process (in this and later articles); perhaps most experienced writers begin often with "well-learned, standard [goals] stored in memory"--that is, with generically defined and established goals. At the very least, as Flower and Hayes acknowledge, many writers

begin with the "goals associated with a given genre." Understanding writing processes, then, must include understanding the generic goals: what they are--the historical, community, and rhetorical forces that shape them--how writers learn them, and how writers use them.

Yet another example of how genre can clarify our understanding of writing comes from studies of revision. Several researchers (Flower and Hayes again, in their more recent article on "Detection, Diagnosis, and Revision," but also Nancy Sommers in her "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers") describe an important part of revision as perceiving dissonance, between intention and text or between intention and execution. But Reither again asserts that "Composition studies does not seriously attend . . . to the knowing without which cognitive dissonance is impossible" (p. 142). How, Flower and Hayes ask, "can we say that a writer detects a dissonance or a failed comparison between text and intention when the second side of the equation, an 'ideal' or 'correct' or intended text doesn't exist--when there is no template to 'match' the current text against?" ("Detection," p. 27). My answer, of course, is that the writer's knowledge of genre may provide the 'ideal' or 'prototypical' text against which the actual text is matched. In the same article, Flower and Hayes wonder that a group of lawyers could not see anything to revise for a lay audience when faced with a federal regulation--a genre that they knew well and that probably set their expectations for what a text should look like.

Experienced writers may be better at perceiving the dissonance necessary to revision because they are better at perceiving what a text of a certain genre should "look" like (with a reminder here that generic expectations and conventions go well beyond formal formulas).

If experienced writers often work from well-established goals and plans when writing and from well-established generic "ideal" texts when revising, perhaps our students could write better if they had more and better understandings of genres. Currently, we good writing teachers avoid teaching our students types of texts because we avoid teaching formulas for writing. We work so hard to break our students of the one genre they seem to know well, the five-paragraph theme, why would we teach them another formula for them to overuse? We wouldn't, of course, because we wouldn't teach genre as formula but rather as appropriate response to a recurring rhetorical situation within a particular discourse community. Even the five-paragraph theme could develop a critical awareness of genre if we were to explore with our students the community and rhetorical situation for which they use the five-paragraph theme, the exigency and constraints that have made the five-paragraph theme so useful for them but so inappropriate in college. Along with teaching a critical awareness of genre, we could teach students how to teach themselves to write a particular genre, what common elements of texts reveal about what is expected in writing for that situation and community. We might even teach a few particular genres if we are preparing our students for college-

level academic writing, but as dynamic, rhetorically and community-situated types. Even the research paper might not be a terrible thing to teach if we taught it not as a dry process of notecards and bibliographies but rather as a genre with certain purposes and audiences, with an expected persona and use of evidence.

Teaching genres in these ways is probably not so different from how many teachers teach these genres today. But the understanding of genre that I describe here gives us a theoretical perspective for doing what we do and for doing more of it. We need not apologize for teaching genres if we are teaching rhetorically and community situated genres. Instead, we might need to reconsider what we are doing when we teach writing apart from any generic context. For most of our writing, I would argue, we have some standard type of text in mind; for example, we can all tell when someone has written a 4C's paper with a 3C's article in mind as opposed to a 4C's talk. Of course, we must also learn how to write a newly encountered type of text (for which genre teaching would prepare writers). Although less often than we might think, certainly some of the writing that our students and we do is not generically defined. Writers do need to know how to write a text for which no apparent, established genre exists. We should teach that. But we should remember that much of our students' writing will be generically established, and they need to know how to approach such writing tasks as more than slot-filling, formulaic writing.

I would not argue that we should teach only particular genres

or only genres. But I would argue--and have--that we should give more pedagogical and theoretical attention to genre than we currently do. A better understanding of genre, as embodiment and reflection of rhetorical situation and of discourse community, can serve as a controlling idea for re-uniting some of the long-standing and false dichotomies in composition theory: reuniting reading and writing, process and product, form and function. A better understanding of genre can also rejoin rhetorical and social approaches, embedding rhetorical situation within the discourse community. Rather than allowing literary scholars to have full control of the concept and rather than allowing traditionalists to tell us "But that's not what genre is," we should work for a better understanding of genre so that we can assert that that is exactly what genre is and it's a powerful concept for our understanding of writing.

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